

Verification Key to Selling SALT Treaty in the Senate

By Vernon A. Guidry Jr.
Washington Star Staff Writer

"There is a suspicion," an administration official acknowledged recently, "that we are trying to create some new way of looking at SALT agreements. It sounds very fishy to some people."

The people the Carter administration is most concerned about are the senators who will vote on ratification of the strategic arms limitation treaty with the Soviet Union. What seems fishy to many of them is the way the administration is talking about verifying Soviet compliance with the emerging agreement.

The verification issue turns on whether the United States can monitor Soviet activities well enough to determine if there is cheating. How the administration makes its case could be decisive in the Senate's SALT debate.

Senate skepticism has been so strong that the administration already has revamped its approach in hopes of winning over the doubters in key Senate committee hearings this summer.

"THERE IS A BASIC credibility problem because many senators don't understand verification," insists an administration official.

The administration talks about an "adequately verifiable" treaty. That, some officials are willing to admit, sounds like an attempt to weasel out of difficulties in the agreement.

But, they fervently maintained, that is the kind of language that always has been used. "A lot of people expect 100 percent certainty in arms control — and we've never had it," says one official.

That is the message that will be taken to the Senate Intelligence Committee where the administration will make its most painstaking case for verification.

The attempt will be made to convince the senators that the mere existence of monitoring uncertainties is not in itself a disabling element of the treaty. They will be asked to make a judgment about whether the uncertainties are too large for safety.

THIS STRATEGY grew out of early and informal administration appearances before members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in little-noticed sessions on SALT.

When the time came to discuss verification, the first administration witness to brief committee members was a CIA man who talked about monitoring uncertainties.

When the senators heard the percentages, "they came out of their chairs and went into low earth orbit," said one chagrined administration SALT expert whose later explanations did not catch up with the shock of the monitoring uncertainties.

The administration has more difficulty on verification, however, than merely steering senators away from demands for absolute monitoring capability. There are real problems as well.

"Nobody's going to fool anybody about, for instance, cruise missile range because, believe me, the uncertainty is large," says one official.

BUT THE ADMINISTRATION will argue in this case and others that large discrepancies matter only if they result in serious military risks.

"Some significant monitoring uncertainties are acceptable because

what you really have to worry about is huge monitoring uncertainty," says one official.

The verification issue most worrisome to senators does not fall in that category, however. It deals with new missiles. SALT II allows each side one new type.

Beyond that, modifications to existing type missiles cannot exceed five percent on size, throw weight and launch weight.

The loss of U.S. monitoring stations on the Soviet border in Iran has curtailed U.S. ability to check on these factors. One administration official estimates that without the Iranian station the uncertainty over measuring throw weight, the size of the payload of warheads, has increased three times. The uncertainty over measuring launch weight has increased five times, says this official.

IT WILL BE at least a year before most — but not all — of the SALT monitoring capability can be restored by other means. Officials argue that this is adequate, however, since it will take the Russians longer than that to test and perfect new missiles.

"We've turned over the hourglass on our year," says a SALT expert. "The Soviets have not turned over the hourglass on a new missile."

U.S. officials will argue that the United States has still another kind of hedge to use against Soviet cheating. A safety margin can be built into U.S. forces.

A case in point is the system of multiple missile silos being considered to counter new accuracy in Soviet warheads. SALT limits Soviet land-based ICBMs to 10 warheads each.

Because of peculiarities in the design of the "bus" that contains the warheads on the Russians' biggest missile, and because of recent Soviet missile tests, there is some question about Soviet ability to fly missiles with more than 10 warheads.

THAT REDUCES U.S. monitoring confidence on the warhead question, says an official, but that can be compensated for by building more missile silos.

Administration officials believe that the most compelling case will be made by comparing SALT II verification uncertainties with the situation that would exist without a SALT treaty.

For instance, without the restraints of SALT, the Soviets could test their biggest missile with 20 or 30 warheads, that number would make it impossible for the United States to compensate by building more silos in any multiple protective silo scheme to hide U.S. missiles.

Some SALT critics argue that provisions of the treaty remain unverifiable even with the administration's attempt to sell the Senate on the notion that it can live with uncertainty. Beyond that, these skeptics maintain that while sophisticated arguments are being made in the Senate, the public is being largely misled into thinking Soviet behavior can be monitored by the United States.

Still other critics, such as the authoritative former SALT negotiator Paul Nitze, maintain that verification is largely a political issue since, as he sees it, the limits set by the SALT treaty are so high that there is little incentive for the Soviets to cheat.